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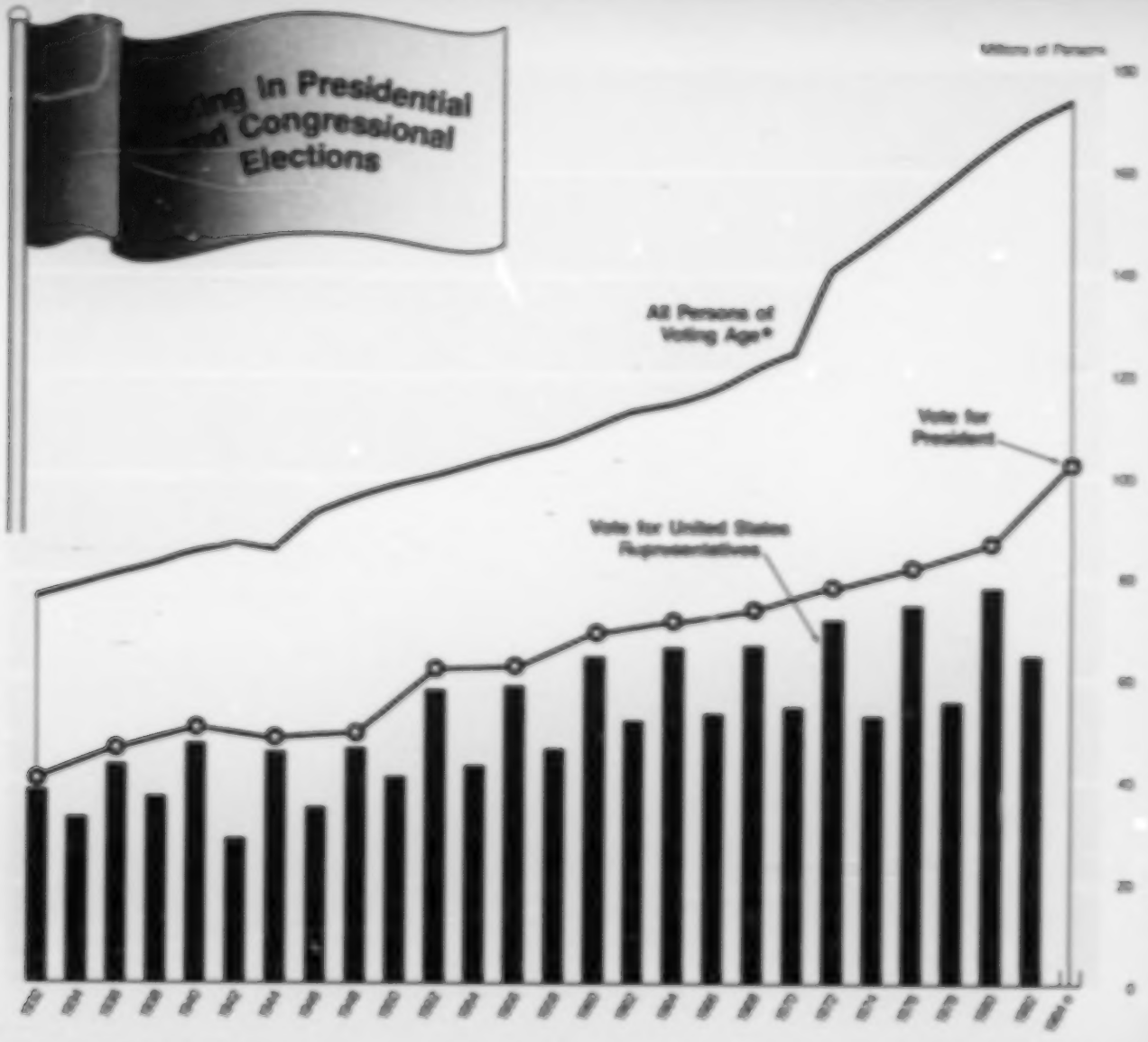
The Conference Board

Who Votes and How Much Does it Cost?

Economic Road Maps
Nos. 1980–1981

September, 1984

Not quite two out of three citizens, 21 years of age and older, voted in the presidential election of 1960. That 62.8% voter participation rate was higher than in any election in the prior 30 years. Since 1960, the participation rate has declined in every election. Voter turnout is typically hugher for older people, among the more educated, and among the more affluent. Educational attainment and living standards have been rising for many years, but the average age of the population was falling until recently—and the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1972. The participation rates for some population groups remained steady or rose slightly between the 1976 and 1980 elections, and some further turnaround in participation is anticipated this year. The rate, however, is unlikely to return to the level of 1960.



Note: Voting data based on official election returns.

*Includes resident non-citizens.
e = Estimated

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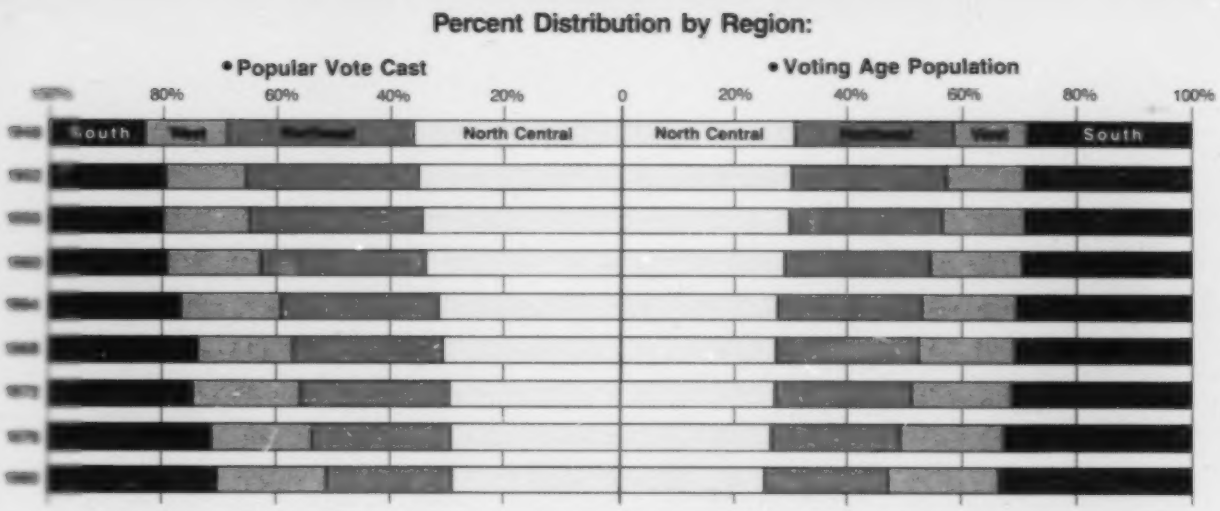
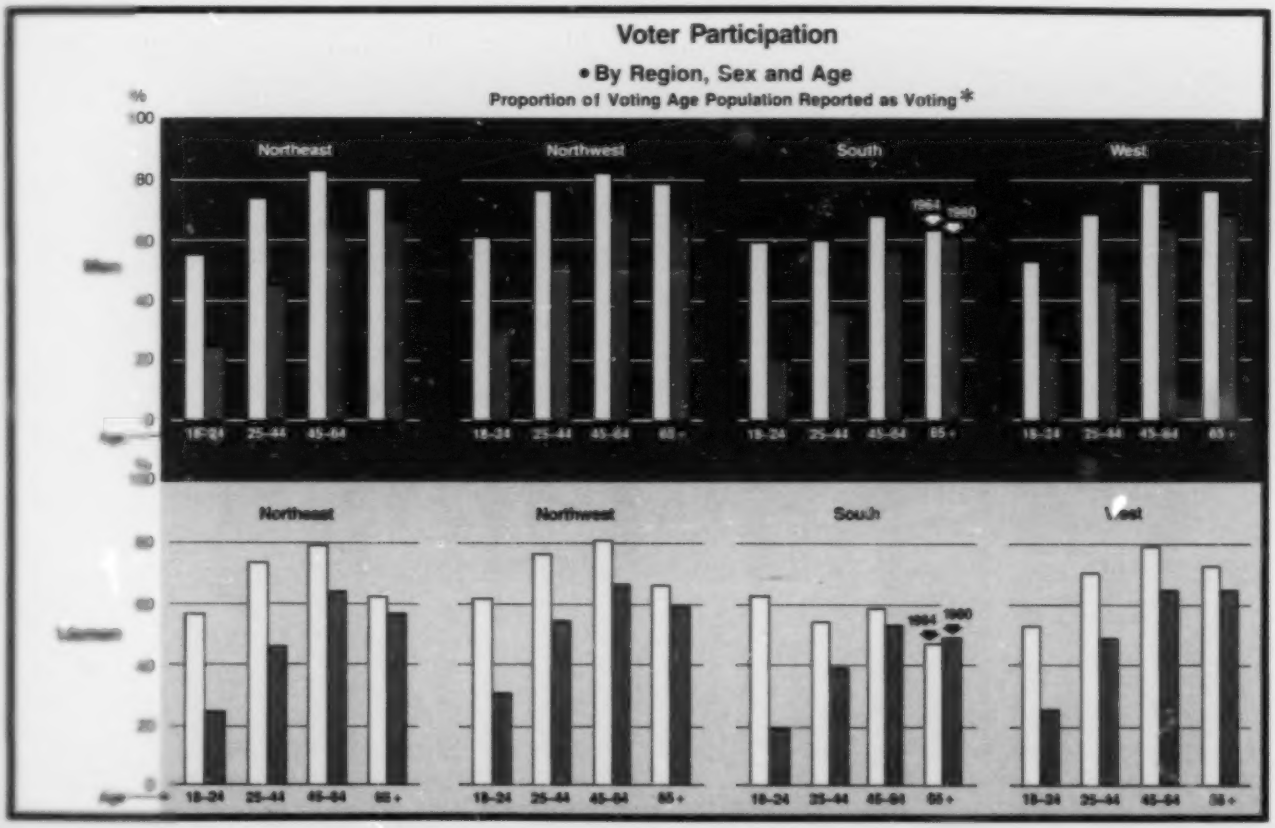
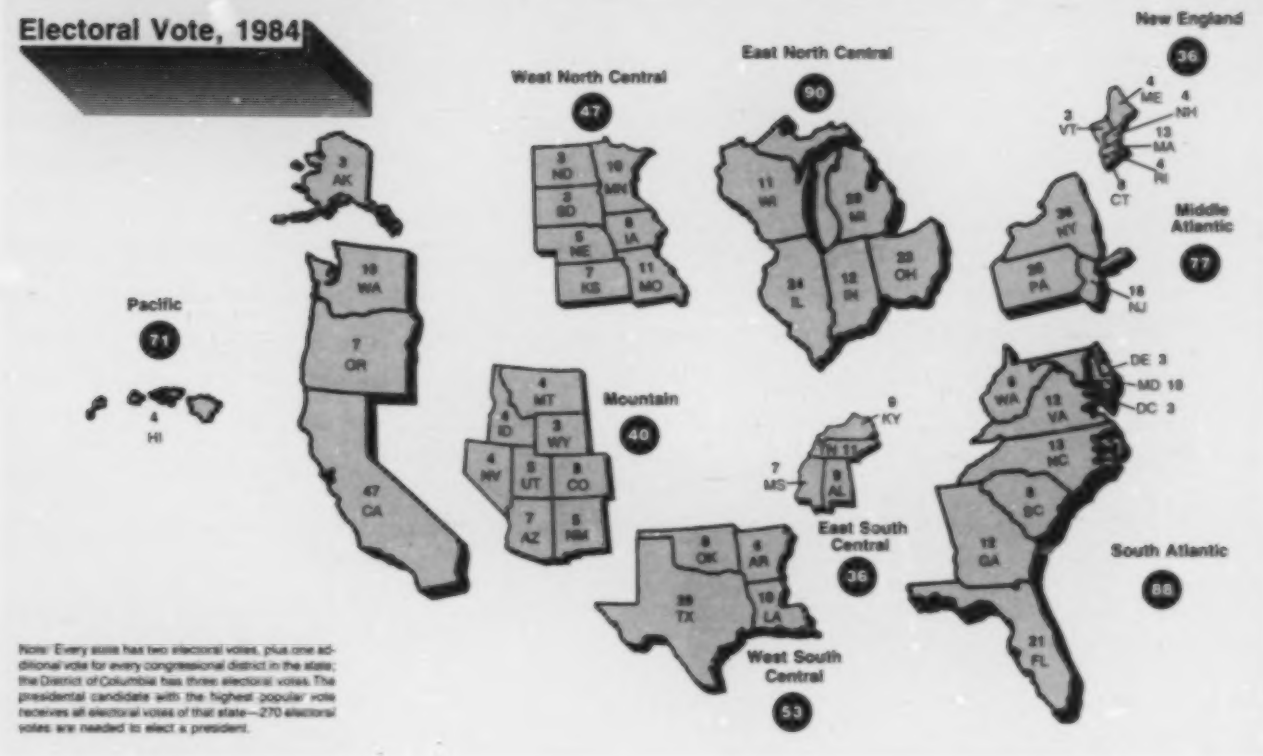


In 49 of the 50 states (North Dakota is the exception), one must register to vote in order to do so in primary or general elections. Increasing voter turnout, then, requires increased efforts to enroll potential voters. In most states, one registers as a Democrat or Republican—or as independent or for one of the minor parties. American voters are increasingly less inclined to be closely identified with either of the major parties, and at the same time, the role played by the major party in most campaigns has declined. Candidates rely more on their own political fund-raising to finance election campaigns. Fund-raising and information dissemination are the key roles for which candidates used to rely on the major parties. Almost all candidates for office depend heavily on the media, especially television commercials, to get their message across to potential voters. Whether the decline in major party influence leads voters to identify less closely with them, or whether it is the other way around, today's electorate is more independently minded and more likely to vote across party lines. Unfortunately, the electorate is also more inclined to stay home on election day.

The decline in voter participation has been steep, steady and substantial in the last two decades. It dropped for both women and men, for every age group, and for every income class. It declined for both whites and non-whites through 1976. The rate remained fairly level for whites in 1980, but rose slightly for nonwhites. The nonwhite participation rate,



*Based on population surveys, data consistently report approximately 5–10% more voting than actual votes cast.



Note: Every state has two electoral votes, plus one additional vote for every congressional district in the state; the District of Columbia has three electoral votes. The presidential candidate with the highest popular vote receives all electoral votes of that state—270 electoral votes are needed to elect a president.

however, has been, and is likely to remain, considerably lower than that of whites. Voter turnout has always been higher in the Northeast and Midwest than in the West and the South. It fell in all regions from 1960 through 1976. It remained fairly steady in the North and West in 1980. The participation rate rose in the South in 1980, partly because of the higher nonwhite turnout.

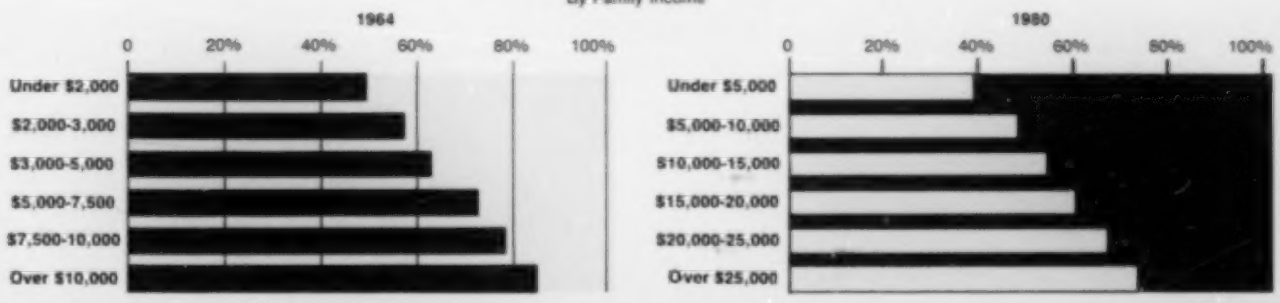
Voter participation was lower in the late 1970's than in any period since the 1920's, when turnout was low due to the number of newly enfranchised women who did not vote. Also not voting then were a sizable number of young adults whose parents were not citizens. Women and young adults voted in substantially larger numbers in 1932, and in elections thereafter. One theory suggests that a large number of new voters frequently sit out the first few elections because they need time to sort out what voting means for them and how they wish to express it. It is conceivable that those who became eligible to vote in the 1970's, but did not cast a ballot then, are beginning to vote in increasing numbers. Higher voting participation for the young, for nonwhites and, for different reasons, for senior citizens, are expected to result in a rise in the total participation rate this year.

Consistent and reliable data on voting are readily available. Unfortunately, no such records have been kept on how much was spent in political campaigns. The Citizens' Research Foundation (at the University of Southern California) has estimated that almost $300 million was spent on behalf of the major party candidates for President in 1980; $239 million was spent on congressional races and $192 million on gubernatorial races. Total spending on all primary and general election campaigns may have approached $1.2 billion in 1980.

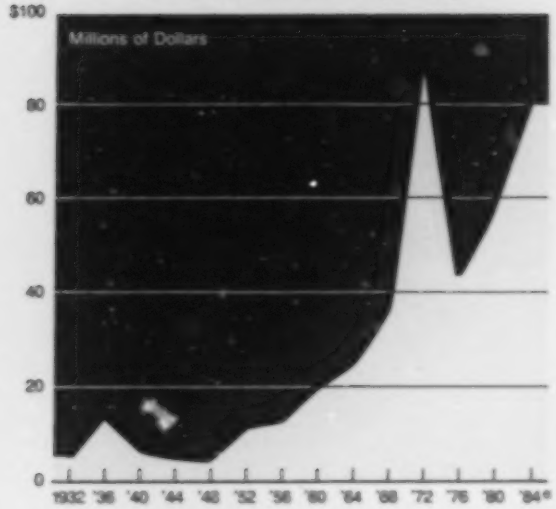
Of the $300 million spent on presidential campaigns in 1980, only $60 million was directly under the control of the candidates' committees during the general election contest. Using the Citizens' Research Foundation estimates for only this category of spending during the last half century, it is possible to estimate a path, over time, of constant-dollar spending per vote actually cast (the GNP deflator is used to

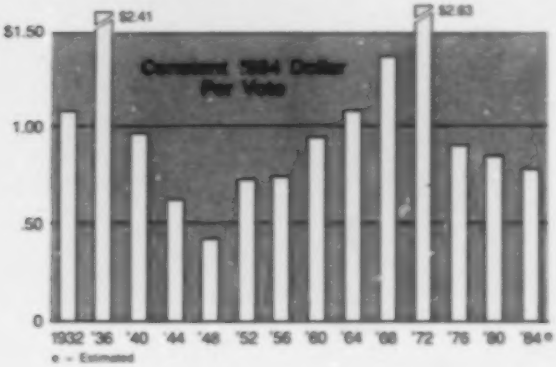
Voter Participation

By Family Income



Presidential Candidate Spending





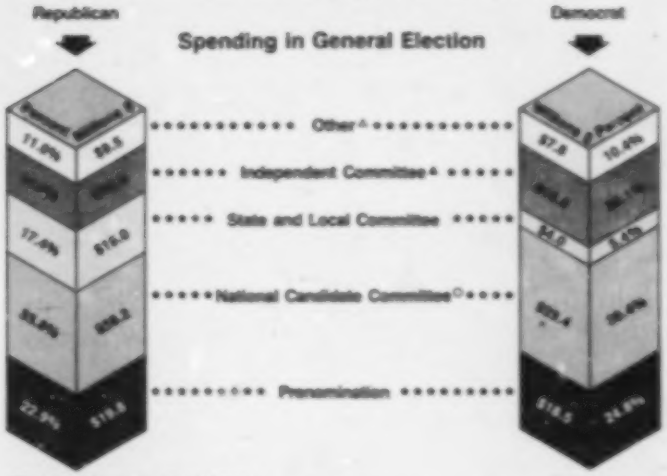
convert the data into constant dollars). These data show that real spending has hovered close to a dollar per vote (in dollars of 1984 spending power). Assuming that the spending estimates for the earlier years have not been significantly overstated, this suggests that there may have been some overstatement of concern about the escalating cost of getting elected, and how and under what conditions such funds are raised. These concerns have given rise to a shift away from private funding after the 1972 contest. Starting in 1976, public funding, generated by a $1 checkoff on personal income tax returns for the four years up to, and including, the election year, have been made available to the nominees for the post-convention presidential contest. The two presidential candidates will each receive $40 million this year.

Ken Goldstein

Sources: Citizen's Research Foundation; Congressional Quarterly Press; Bureau of Economic Analysis; Bureau of Census; The Conference Board.

Spending data are taken from *Financing Politics*, Herbert Alexander, Congressional Quarterly Press (Washington D.C., 1984.)

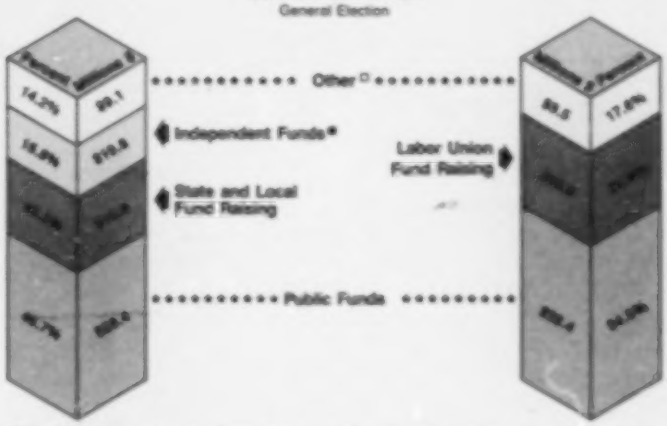
Presidential Campaign Funding, 1980



[D] Exclusively financed through public funds.
[A] Includes independent delegate selection spending and communication costs.
[A] Includes spending by labor and corporate campaign committees, financial reporting compliance and national party spending.

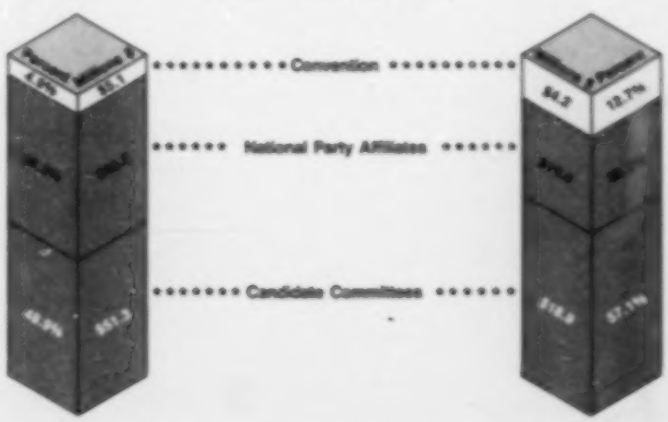
Source of Funds

General Election



[*] Funds raised and spent outside the control of, and not coordinated with, candidate campaigns.
[D] Includes funds raised by national party.

Prenomination Spending



ECONOMIC ROAD MAPS

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